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TABLE APPOINTMENTS.*

BY

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The same remarks apply to the European porcelains of the eighteenth century, or the faiences of Holland, France, Italy and Germany of the same or an earlier period. The earliest proceed from direct imitations of the designs of Eastern Asia. These also are frequently baroque and bizarre in form, and some crude and imperfect in the execution of the coloured ornament, but still effective in decoration, and sound and good in colour, whereas the porcelain of the nineteenth century has been until now either entirely void of effect or glaring, hard and gaudy, and while it does its best to represent its flowers or portraits or any other of its ornaments in the most perfect and artistic manner it misses its object because it is on a false route. The earlier porcelain appears to take the matter more easily, and strews its ornaments lightly, as if by chance, over the surfaces, either because attracted by the imitation of Chinese ornamentation, or, as in the rococo and subsequent period, because flower and fruit decoration was thought the most natural. It does not trouble itself about the form, or organic structure of the vessel and its constituent parts, but even shapes knob, handle and foot like plants and fruits. If we analyse for example, such a porcelain service as that of the well known Meissen blue and white pattern, we shall find but little to praise in its composition, form or design, though in its ensemble it produces on the table so admirable an effect, and

harmonises so thoroughly with an artistic arrangement that it is difficult to find another superior, or even equal to it.

Connoisseurs therefore are perfectly justified in their preference of the old porcelain services of this kind to any modern productions, for they fulfil the great object, the decoration both of the table and the room. But on the other hand they go too far in our opinion when they hold them up as absolute models, and represent their capricious and even reprehensible forms as inseparably and necessarily connected with them. It is possible, assuredly, to preserve the decorative principle, to attempt and succeed in attaining the same decorative effect, and at the same time to give to the several pieces of the service more regular and less excentric forms. To such a result there can be no obstacle, and when this point is reached there is nothing further to be desired. The table service will produce its due effect in the harmonious character of the whole, and each separate piece will be in itself a separate work of art. This is the task, and it cannot be an impossible one, for the porcelain manufacturer.

To this end, besides the pictorial ornament the artist has also to consider the form of his production; the organisation of its several parts, the sweep of its lines and general outline, the shape of the foot cover and handle are matters which can no longer be left to chance or caprice. The colouring must be in unison with this organisation, and cease to present that appearance of accident which

* Concluded from p. 147 ante.

pervades the porcelains of the eighteenth century. There is, however, one danger to be guarded against, for through strict correctness of form and decoration, it might easily happen that a certain stiffness would ensue, so that by a too sparing use of ornament, to which the material itself invites, all effect would be lost. So in both respects the happy medium must be kept: the decoration modest, producing a somewhat similar effect to the productions of the rococo period, and in the form a certain freedom, ease and flexibility which agrees perfectly with the delicate, pliable, but yet solid and strong material. Articles of mere luxury which serve no distinct purpose, but are simply intended for show, may go further in both directions, as, for example in the rich massive porcelain, the old Sevres and the English, the colouring can hardly be delicate and misty enough to be homogeneous with the material. But these are objects whose charm is in themselves, and have nothing to do with the decoration of the table or dining room.

Those pieces also, whose sole object is the decoration of the table, the fruit dishes, flower vases and epergnes, may receive a higher ornamentation, since here another material is frequently employed, as faience, silver or glass. Such a service as the before mentioned blue one of Meissen with the bulbous pattern is of sufficient effect in this respect, by the great prominence of the deep blue colour which is all the more effective by being kept unmixed and undisturbed by any other. Still, it is not every kind of porcelain, however well and correctly decorated, that equally fulfils its destination, nor is uniformity always desirable. Modern faience with its richer colouring, like that of Minton, Deak and many others may here be most successfully employed in the place of porcelain.

So also with silver, which brings a new element into the appointments of the table, and is by no means to be banished, or on æsthetical grounds rejected. Opulence will make a display with it, and has a perfect right to do so: the only point is as to the manner in which the display is made. If heavy and ungainly vessels are placed on the table, having scarcely any value beyond that of the metal itself at so much per oz. we need not trouble ourselves to characterise it further: it carries its condemnation with it. The more costly the material, the more noble and delicate should be the treatment of it, if only with the view of mitigating its glimmer. Artistic treatment is therefore indispensable for silver table appointments, but it must be well considered how it is to be applied, for through very zeal to enhance its value, a false route may be entered upon or the mark may be overshot. This is an observation which we have frequent occasion to make at the present day.

In contrast to the silver ornaments which we have till of late been accustomed to see on the table, a very praiseworthy effort is now displaying itself in their manufacture towards introducing both beauty of form and delicacy of execution in detail. Good silver workmanship for table use of the Renaissance period is no longer to be met with in any great quantity, particularly such objects as are intended

for ornament only, as lustres, vases or epergnes: what has been preserved by old families and used by them for festive entertainments belongs to a later period, especially to the rococo, and has besides become an honorable piece of antiquity which we under any circumstances regard with respect. We should not advise it to be smelted down, or exchanged even for any of better form, or indeed altered in any way. But what the nineteenth century has produced, and it is chiefly that which is now seen on the table, has neither beauty of form nor excellence of workmanship, nor age, nor reminiscences, nor any adequate effect. Therefore we say, away with it. If it can be exchanged for anything better, let it be so at once, without any hesitation. But, as we have said, in its zeal for improvement, modern art has sometimes missed and sometimes overshot the mark. We will not speak of those large monumental or historical centre pieces which are now to be met with in every exhibition. We may certainly and justly condemn them, but they are exceptional articles and we have only to occupy ourselves with such as are the rule and not the exception. And among these we already find, as the outcome of the most modern effects, as proofs of a conscientious determination for improvement, many ornaments exclusively intended for the table, such as branch-candelabra, fruit and confectionary dishes, flower vases &c., which are remarkable for the beauty and nobleness of their form, the delicacy of their outline and the rich workmanship of scrolls, foliage and flowers and even of figures. Some of these are more in the spirit of the antique, some in that of the renaissance, but there is but little difference. They have however one fault in common, that they are the work of the sculptor rather than the silversmith, that is to say, they are executed without regard to the material, and even externally contrary to their destination. For their special destination is to be an ornament of the dining table, to take their part in the artistic effect of the ensemble, to be as it were a particular instrument in the harmony of the concert, and for this purpose silver is eminently adapted: the bright white metal produces a play of light which is perhaps somewhat to the detriment of the sculptor, but here, where only a decorative effect is desired, is quite in place. It may be, however, that the effect of this bright polished silver will be such as to impair that of the other objects; then the task must be to mitigate this, or apply it with moderation, but not altogether to annihilate this, its essential and artistic property. This is just what is done in the case of the silver vessels alluded to above: the metal is so strongly oxidised that it becomes black, or grey and dull, with no better effect than lead. Why then use silver at all? we ask. These are certainly works of art, beautiful in themselves, abstractedly considered, but on the table they do not exist for themselves, but belong to the ensemble and should contribute to the general effect, which they are far from doing.

If we are to choose between polished and oxidised silver articles for the table, we certainly prefer the former.

But we have the means of softening the tone by introducing the pale dull metal in suitable spots, as, for example, between the groundwork and the ornaments. Only this process of dulling the silver seems to us equally a mistake, for it brings out in an extraordinary degree the least agreeable side of silver, namely its cold white tone: especially as there is still another and much more effective way of treating the silver surface, that is, by gilding. Our present silversmiths make by far too little use of this, while those of the Renaissance gilded all their silverworks, so that it was quite an exception where they allowed the natural colour of the silver to be seen. It was only in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in the decline that is, of art, that gilding was less and less practised. After its employment alone, followed a mixture of silver and gilt and then the silver only. Against the use of gilding the principle may be advanced that no one material ought to be made to assume the appearance of another; a principle quite correct in itself, yet subject to some limitation, especially in respect of gilding. To paint a porcelain tea pot so as to give it the appearance of wood would be absurd, even if it were possible. But in the present instance there is merely the substitution of the appearance of one material for another closely allied to it: one noble metal assumes the appearance of another, and it is not intended to produce a delusive impression, or to deceive in any way, but simply to apply a most effective and indispensable art which on account of its expense was almost out of the reach of the world at large. But if the application may be admitted on principle then it is hard to be understood why art should reject this method, since the colour is much more beautiful than that of the pale silver and harmonises much better with the other colours. The proof of this may be seen in the present use, though in our opinion too widely adopted, of gilt frames for pictures.

What we have said on the subject of silver appointments for the dining table is equally applicable to tea services. As far as they are of silver, or imitations of silver, they are obnoxious to the same reproaches as the silver candelabra, epergnes and dishes for the table. Here indeed the oxidising which robs the table of ornament is disused, while the bright polished silver plays the greatest part. But another fault, namely defect in form, is perhaps more evident in the tea than in the table-services. In the latter case the defect arises from the forms of the renaissance period, whence their history begins, and however they may have deteriorated, they have at all events a respectable origin, and may easily be brought back to better forms. Not so however the tea service: its forms originate from China not from Greece or Italy, and moreover its models were not of silver or any other metal, for the Chinese porcelain tea pots furnished the pattern. Now it is certainly the destination of the object which above all else should be considered in its form, but the material also as shown by a comparison of Grecian vessels in metal and terra-cotta, is of the highest influence: and this factor is almost entirely overlooked

in the silver or metal teapots of the present day. In these last days only do we see any effort, and that confined to English and French silversmiths, to emancipate the tea services from the forms of the Chinese porcelain pattern, and to give it a freer and more beautiful shape, and these are exceptions like the gilt ones, both of which are however in the increase and give us the hope of better things in the future.

While treating of the metal appointments of the table, we will take the opportunity to say a few words about the knives, forks and spoons, though they play but a very secondary part in its decoration. They glitter a little by their polish, and this is something on the dining table of the present day, which confining itself to what is wholly white abjures all artistic aid; but as they add little to the decorative effect, they afford more scope for the second requirement, namely, that they should be something in themselves; that is, of pleasing and shapely pattern. If however form is to be dependent on destination and use, this is no where more the case than in these articles, which if not suited to their purpose become dangerous, or at least unpleasant to the sight. But, as is frequently the case, so here, beauty of form coincides with conformity to purpose. Elaboration is here out of place, and the simplest forms are at the same time the most beautiful. Of all articles of this kind the English are at present the most conformable to their purpose, the consequence indeed of their scrupulously refined habits, which were also the reason for their studying the most suitable forms in order to avoid as much as possible anything that might jar against sovereign custom. For this reason alone the English forms are the simplest and most beautiful: they appear what they are, and are consequently good in style though they may not be ornamental, a quality which is indeed little considered in these English articles now in use. The direction which has been taken in England is so much the more praiseworthy as there is a remarkable lack of models from any good period of art. It is only in the latest times that the form has been so much considered, the natural consequence of refined manners at the table. At the most only a few forms of olden times are used as patterns. Forks were not unknown to the middle ages, but they were little used, and were all of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and by no means suitable to our present habits. This is also the case with the spoons which with their short handles of the sixteenth, and their longer but round ones of the seventeenth century are equally uncomfortable for our use. As to the bowl, the pointed form which prevails in England and the oval shape of the continent are entirely connected with the manner in which they are used, and can hardly furnish any motives.

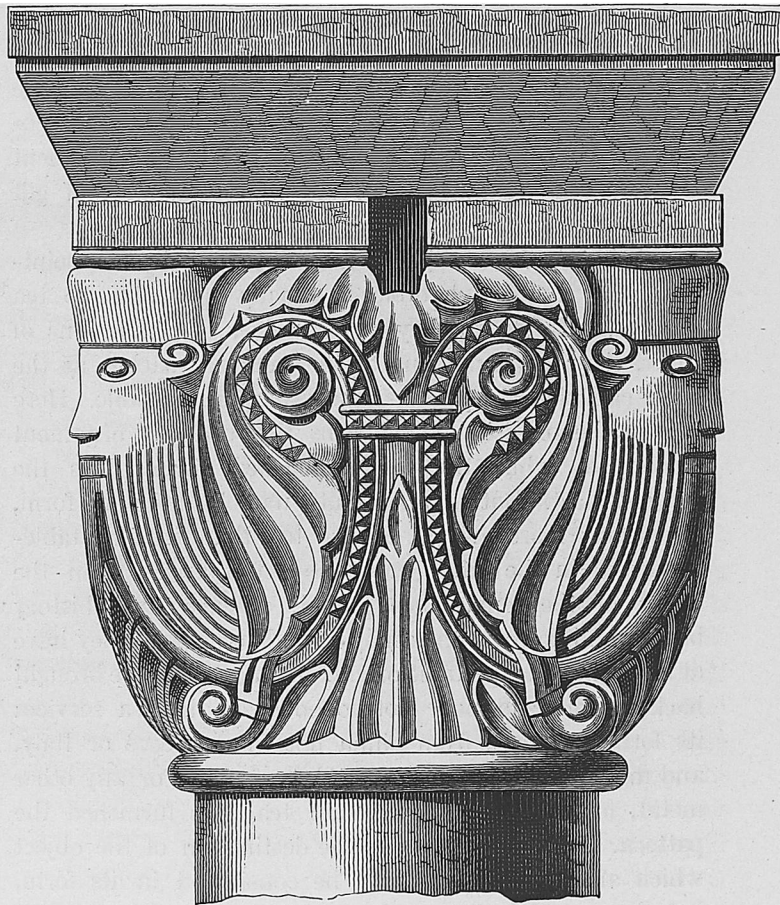
If these articles are of but comparatively small importance for the decoration of the table and dining room, the contrary is the case with regard to the glass which frequently replaces, and at the present day very largely replaces, the several luxurious materials of which we have already spoken, and is in every case the material for drinking vessels, which are now so complicated in

their arrangement that whole batteries of different sized glasses surround the plates of the guests, so that they always play a great part in every entertainment. We will however refrain from entering into details with respect to its æsthetic importance, but content ourselves with showing, in a few words, how far it contributes to the artistic ensemble of the table, or is a work of art in itself, or how it endeavours to unite both these attributes.

We may distinguish three kinds of glass for the table; the English diamond glass, the Venetian, and the modern Bohemian crystal. We apply the epithet modern to this last, because in its new phase, contrasted with its old style, it is but a few years old; and we call it Bohemian, though it is manufactured in England and in France also: but Lobmeyr's Bohemian productions of rock crystal in the style of the art works of the sixteenth century must mark at present the highest point of attainment and are the most characteristic. These three kinds correspond very remarkably with the

three artistic points of view. The diamond glass of the English neglects the form, and necessarily so, but it sheds over the whole table light and colour, which is its real object, and thus answers to the decorative purpose in an eminent degree. The Venetian glass on the other hand looks especially to the form, and gives us, as it is now again produced, an abundance of most graceful, charming and noble shapes, but as it is without lustre or brilliancy, has no effect in the ensemble, even if ornamented with coloured stripes. The modern Bohemian glass unites brilliancy and form, and adds also a third ingredient of beauty, an engraved ornament. With its polish and its pure and clear material it has brilliancy and light enough to produce effect, though it does not vie with the English in its colour, and adds a noble artistic perfection both in form and decoration. It is equally important as a decoration and as a work of art in itself, and this fulfilment of the double task we consider as the highest standpoint at which æsthetic composition has to aim.

SPECIMENS OF ORNAMENTATION.



Nos 1 and 2. Romanesque Capitals from the Convent Church of Drübeck, near Wernigerode.